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## **Student Drug Testing Only Shows Effects Among Girls in High Schools With Good Social Climates**

### **Regardless of Climate, No Deterrent Effect for Boys, National Study Finds**

Research conducted with over 940 high school students in two nationally representative surveys finds that male students in high schools that conduct student drug testing report no less recent use of alcohol, marijuana, or cigarettes than male students in schools without drug testing. Although there was evidence of effectiveness for female students, this only occurred in schools that have good social climates, where the students and adults respect each other and the rules of the school are clear and enforced fairly (see Figure below).

The research, based on the National Annenberg Survey of Youth conducted by a team of researchers at the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, involved confidential telephone interviews with high school students across the U.S. in 2007 and 2008. The study was recently published online in the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*.

"This study sends a cautionary note to the estimated 20% or more of high schools that have joined the drug testing bandwagon," noted study co-author Dan Romer, director of the Adolescent and Health Communication Institutes of APPC. "We find little evidence that this approach to minimizing teen drug use is having the deterrent effect its proponents claim. And only in schools that have a very good school climate, reported by about a third of students, does this intervention exert a protective influence on adolescent girls. Schools that have joined the rush to implement testing should ask themselves whether this strategy has been oversold."

Student drug testing has been a controversial issue with public health and civil liberty organizations opposed to its use. However, two Supreme Court decisions have supported the practice if it is done in the interests of screening students for sports or for other extracurricular activities. The Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools in the

Department of Education (<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/drugtesting/index.html>) continues to encourage schools to adopt drug testing. The present study found that 27% of students reported that their schools engaged in the practice.

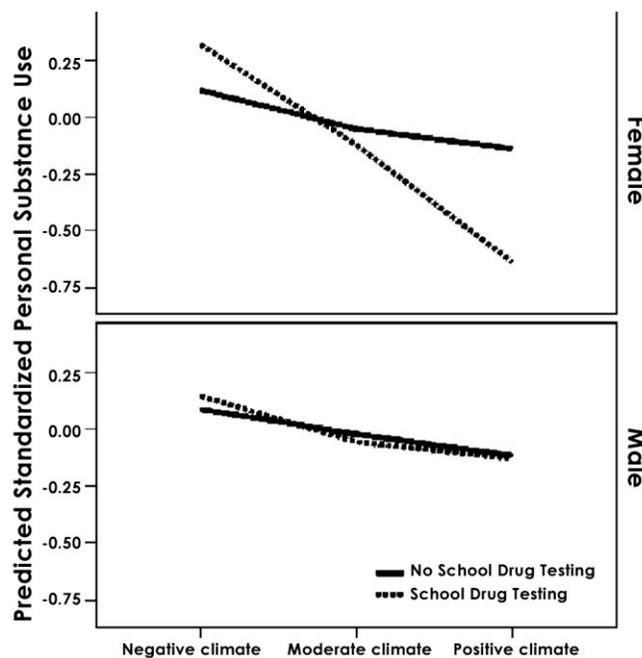
Previous research has not found much evidence in support of drug testing. One study actually found that it reduced students' beliefs in the efficacy of the program. The present study's findings show that if it works at all, it is for female students in schools with good climates. However, as seen in the Figure below, female students in schools with bad climates that also test students for drugs may actually use drugs **more** than those in comparable schools without drug testing. This suggests that drug testing may actually be counterproductive in those schools.

As has been found in previous research, schools with good climates have less drug use, a relationship observed in this study for both adolescent boys and girls.

"Schools should consider improving their climates before embarking on drug testing," added Romer. "Students in schools with good climates are far more likely to respond well to messages discouraging the use of drugs than students in schools with poor climates."

Improving school climates has also been a strategy adopted by the federal Department of Education as part of its Safe and Supportive Schools Initiative (<http://safesupportiveschools.ed.gov/index.php?id=01>). However, the present research highlights the potential inconsistency between this approach and the use of drug testing in schools.

Figure: Drug use as a function of school climate and student gender.



Results in this figure taken from the article show that recent drug use (averaged over alcohol, marijuana, and cigarettes) declined in schools with better climates and that it also declined in schools with drug testing for females but not for males. However, there was also a tendency for greater drug use among females in negative climates. The results shown control for differences in age, neighborhood income, race-ethnicity, type of school (public vs. private), region of the country, urban vs. rural location, school size, and grade point average.

## Methods

The study was based on interviews conducted as part of the National Annenberg Survey of Youth in 2007 and 2008 with youth ages 14 to 19 who were in high school. School climate was assessed by asking how well five items, taken from prior research, described the school: The rules in the school are clear; Teachers can handle problems in the school; Students respect other students; Teachers respect students; and Students respect teachers, each answered on a scale from (1) not at all to (4) very well.

Drug testing was determined by asking: "Does your current school ever ask students to participate in drug screening tests?" If the answer was yes, they were asked whether the tests were mandatory and whether they were only for students who wanted to participate in extracurricular activities. Neither of these conditions affected the results.

Drug use was determined by questions asking whether the substance had ever been used and if yes, whether it had been used in the past 30 days. This resulted in a 3-point scale of drug use for alcohol, marijuana, and cigarettes.

Further details about the study are available from the article itself:

<http://www.springerlink.com/content/40182687327vg7w2/fulltext.pdf>

*The Adolescent Communication Institute (ACI) was created by the Annenberg Foundation in 2002 as part of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. ACI aims to inform researchers, policymakers, and the public regarding strategies to prevent risks to healthy adolescent development and to enhance the well-being of youth. It conducts the annual National Annenberg Survey of Youth, the Annenberg Coding of Health and Media Project, and sponsors reviews of research regarding adolescent mental and behavioral health by panels of experts.*

See <http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/> for more information.